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Terrorism and the plot to assassinate the Pope

REVIEW | BOOK

THE TIME OF THE ASSASSINS, by Claire Sterling. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 264 pp. \$14.95.

By Margaret Manning
Globe Staff

Mehmet Ali Agca did not act alone.

The man who failed to murder Pope John Paul II was acting for the Bulgarian secret service, an extension of the KGB, then headed by the now premier of the Soviet Union, Yuri Andropov.

Much of the world refused to believe this when the attempt on the Pope's life happened in May of 1981. Now the world must, the Western world, of course, because the rest of the world does not care.

This is the message of Claire Sterling, who has been reporting on terrorism for years, and "The Time of the Assassins" is her latest jeremiad.

Her prose style is not precise and she falls into cliches like "a smoking gun," but we are not reading Sterling's book as literature. We want information. She accuses the top politicians of the West of wishing a coverup, of wishing not to endanger "detente" by complaining about the Russians.

Sterling uses the word "evidently" with some frequency but that is because even she as oracle does not know everything. Agca, when arrested, behaved coolly and rationally, and she echoes the Italian investigative court which said of him that he "did not come from nowhere." He was a trained terrorist with no appreciable ideology except that he was a dedicated professional killer.

Who wanted to kill the Pope? Why?

Claire Sterling believes that because John Paul is Polish the Russians regard him as a threat to their domination of Eastern Europe, and that, plus the lack of zeal on the part of Western intelligence, explains everything.

If this sounds like a rerun, and it does, it is because Claire Sterling has been saying it right along.

There is plenty of evidence that Agca was supported, both with money and safe houses. He traveled around Europe on sophisticatedly faked passports after he escaped from prison where he had been sentenced to life in 1979 for the murder of a Turkish editor.

The Vatican was the first to talk con-

spiracy. Next the Italian government. Apparently the only thing that went wrong with the plot was that Agca was supposed to have been executed so he could not tell the authorities anything. In the beginning he refused to speak, or told lies. But soon hints were offered, generally ignored by the press. At least that is what Sterling says, while congratulating herself on her doggedness and perspicacity.

She was dogged, and found documents on record that definitely implicated Agca. After she had seen them the documents were declared secret. Witnesses disappeared. Agca's Turkish acquaintances behaved as if bored by Sterling's questions, but the Turkish police were not. She found that Agca had been generously financed while not engaging in terrorism at all and assumes he was a sleeper being held over for a top assignment.

She published much of this in Reader's Digest in 1982 and has amplified upon it at length in her book. She is convincing. She is emphatic. She is cocksure. When she talks of the antics (the only word) of the German criminal police she says outright that she was lied to. The CIA lied to her. Also some Italians, but she does not make a comic country of Italy.

Sterling reports exceedingly well on terrorism in Europe and the Mideast. If she has a fixation on her speciality and if her ego is unattractive, she nonetheless offers a solid case. Who is behind all those Italian kidnappings? Is there a privately financed Dr. No? Or does a government that wishes to disrupt the planet provide the money, the guns, the safe houses?

Should the Pope have forgiven Agca? I read that the failed assassin laughed several times during their interview. I hope Lech Walesa has an army of bodyguards.



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